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OO RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHMR RUEHRN
DE RUEHAN #1034 2821255
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 091255Z OCT 07
FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0510
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0937
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEPADJ/CJTF-HOA CAMP LEMONIER
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

UNCLAS ANTANANARIVO 001034

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DEPT FOR AF/E, AF/FO, AND INR/AA
PARIS FOR D'ELIA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [MA](#)

SUBJECT: HISTORIC SHIP VISIT WELL RECEIVED BY PRESIDENT

¶1. SUMMARY: The historic port call of the USS NORMANDY on the northern coastal city of Diego Suarez from September 29 through October 2, the first such formal ship visit to Madagascar since 1972, showcased greater U.S. engagement in Madagascar. President Ravalomanana's visit onboard the ship was a vivid, and by all appearances successful, reinforcement of the importance of maritime security and the commitment he must make to secure Madagascar's 5000 kilometers of unprotected coastline. END SUMMARY.

¶2. On the sidelines of the ship visit, Ambassador Marquardt marked the Embassy's presence in the region by meeting with local authorities, the business and religious communities, ecotourism operators, health organizations, and students to discuss Diego Suarez' potential and challenges. Sailors came ashore and participated in goodwill events with their counterparts. But the highlight was President Ravalomanana's last-minute official visit onboard the ship on October 2. Noting happily to journalists that the flying of the Malagasy flag onboard was a sign of respect, the President privately commented to Malagasy Navy officers how he would like Madagascar to have such a nice ship and instructed them, "Remember, you will be on board to learn and imitate what is good to be imitated. Always learn from what others do." The President also mentioned to the ship's Captain and the Ambassador that he would like to send his 13-year old son, who currently studies in England, to an American military academy.

¶3. The visit received positive and widespread media coverage in Malagasy television and newspapers at the national and local levels. Reports noted that the USS NORMANDY and Ambassador Marquardt were in Diego to reinforce the bilateral partnership in maritime safety and security. Journalists applauded the "French-speaking American Ambassador" and his wife for donating blood at a local hospital which had been repainted with community relations funding from the USS NORMANDY. The same funds also went to rehabilitating a public park on the Diego shoreline.

¶4. COMMENT: We are expecting U.S. Navy engagement in the Southwest Indian Ocean to increase. In that context, President Ravalomanana will be a willing, even eager partner on maritime security issues - which he also recognizes as a current vulnerability. We particularly welcome the recent decision by the 5th Fleet to designate Diego-Suarez as a port of call. Building on lessons learned during this visit (mainly related to ship draught requirements and poor port infrastructure), we hope to work constructively with Malagasy authorities on improvements that will help this excellent port better realize its potential. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT